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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4973
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2731
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2596
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3217
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0962
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3413
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TURKMEN SUBBOTNIK CREATES A GREENER LANDSCAPE

11. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet Distribution.

12. (U) SUMMARY: On the second weekend of March, President Berdimuhamedov gathered state employees and students, foreign diplomats and businessmen for a national "subbotnik" (Saturday workday) to plant trees around Ashgabat. The event kicked-off the 2009 national tree planting campaign, a practice which was initiated in 1998 by late President Niyazov with the purpose to create forests around Ashgabat and other Turkmen cities. It has been overseen by a self-financed State body named "Green Belt" or "Gok Gushak" in Turkmen. The official statistics claim that 68 million trees have been planted in the ten- year period between 1998 and 2008, and there is a plan to plant three million trees in 2009. Local observers report that only some fifty percent of the trees, which are mostly pine trees, survive beyond the first year due to the dry climate and lack of irrigation water. In addition to planting green belts, the Government is trying to introduce the use of drought and salt resistant local species to protect transport and communications infrastructure from sand drifts. END SUMMARY.

TIME FOR SUBBOTNIK

13. (U) On March 14, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov gathered all government employees, university and high school students, and members of diplomatic missions and foreign businesses for the national "subbotnik" (a Saturday community workday), for large-scale tree planting at the foothills of the Kopetdag Mountains outside Ashgabat. The President planted a young pine tree, thus launching the 2009 national tree-planting campaign. After the trees had been planted, Berdimuhamedov invited high-ranking local and foreign officials for a lunch, which offered dishes featuring the national cuisine. The official media reported that "the guests had a meal with great pleasure and highly appreciated the wisdom and talent of the Turkmen people and Turkmen cooks' workmanship." Turkmen musicians, singers and dance groups performed a concert for the participants of the workday.

"GOK GUSHAK" OR "GREEN BELT"

14. (SBU) The event kicked-off the 2009 "green campaign," which will

include planting and watering trees during the spring and fall months. Turkmenistan launched its first large-scale tree planting campaign in 1998 according to the resolution of the late president Niyazov "On the formation of a park zone at the foothills of Kopetdag." To implement Niyazov's project, a special department responsible for the organization of forest nurseries, forest-growing and planting of greenery was established. Since the project envisaged the development of a large recreational forest park around Ashgabat, which would have surrounded the city like a belt, Niyazov named the department "Gok Gushak," which, translated from Turkmen, means "green belt." According to the Government's statistics, in the framework of the Green Belt national project over 62 million trees have been planted between 1998 and 2005, including 24 million trees in Ashgabat and its suburbs. Six million trees have been planted over the past two years, and the Government's target in 2009 is three million trees.

MINISTRIES AND GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES BUY SEEDLINGS

15. (SBU) All state agencies and enterprises are required to participate in the project by buying seedlings from Gok Gushak, planting and watering trees in spring and fall seasons. Ministries and organizations buy seedlings with their own funds and organize tree planting on their allotted areas by sending their employees to work on weekends without pay. Some ministries have established their own forestry departments, which oversee the tree-planting. For example, the forestry department of the oil and gas complex employs 600 workers with their wages being paid by the Ministry of Oil and Gas. The Ministry of Energy and Industry established a similar forestry department for planting and tending a forest area. Its expenses are also paid out of the ministry's internal funds.

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Ministries and agencies that do not have the funds to buy seedlings require their employees purchase them. School and kindergarten administrators require parents to buy seedlings for their children.

CORRUPTION UNDER "GOK GUSHAK"

16. (SBU) Under Niyazov, because of his preference for foreign tropical trees, Gok Gushak was turned into a joint stock company with the responsibility to buy palm and cypress tree seedlings in Iran and to sell them to government agencies. A special decree by Niyazov released Gok Gushak from payment of taxes. While information about the identity of Gok Gushak's stockholders is not known, Turkmen opposition websites claimed that Niyazov's son controlled this business, and had a cut of USD 150 million per year.

BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S "GREEN" OBJECTIVES

17. (SBU) Under President Berdimuhamedov, the Government's priority for tree planting is to develop and use drought and salt resistant local species to protect transport and communications infrastructure from sand drifts. A Pol/Econ contact at the National Desert Institute said the Institute was doing research on developing a technology for protecting the 560-kilometer Ashgabat - Karakum Desert - Dashoguz railway from sand drifts. (NOTE: Passengers on the Ashgabat-Dashoguz train told Pol/Econ LES that a special car, carrying soldiers to clear sand from the railway, is attached to the train. END NOTE.) To accomplish this objective, the Government needs to provide sufficient funding and train qualified specialists. A local nature protection specialist told Pol/Econ LES that a special course on forestry should be reinstated at the Turkmen State University. Also, the contact thought that it is necessary to revise the structure of the forestry sector. The self-financing requirement has forced some forestry organizations, including the Ministry of Nature and the Gok Gushak Joint Stock Company, to turn to agricultural production, as it is more profitable to meet short-term management goals.

"GREEN" BY COMMAND METHODS

18. (SBU) So far the Government continues to apply command methods to achieve its goal in becoming "green." At a recent session of the Cabinet of Ministers, Berdimuhamedov severely reprimanded Executive

Director of Gok Gushak Joint-Stock Company, Hudaiguly Orazsahedov, for "unsatisfactory performance of official duties." The Turkmen press service reported that "Hudaiguly Orazsahedov has been warned that if he fails to take necessary steps to improve the work of the joint-stock company in accordance with qualifying standards, he will be relieved of his post." During the meeting, Prosecutor General Chary Khodjamuradov reported to the President on the status of tree planting conducted by ministries and agencies. The report flagged those ministries and agencies that failed to take proper care of the trees on their allotted plots.

GUESS WHO IS RIDING A HORSE

¶9. (SBU) During the March 14 subbotnik, President Berdimuhamedov appeared riding a beautiful Ahal-Teke horse, which was decorated with Turkmen traditional silver work. The ground under the President's feet was covered by hand-made carpets, leaving a small hole for planting a tree. A spade designated for the President was painted gold as was a wheelbarrow of dirt and a watering can. Historically, the idea of the first Soviet-era subbotniks proposed that Communist leaders worked shoulder to shoulder together with the working class people, so that the latter would view them as one of their own. In the updated Turkmen version, the subbotnik's stage directors did everything possible to distinguish the President from other tree planters.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Local experts cast doubt on the success of the

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Government's large-scale tree-planting project, mostly because of Turkmenistan's dry climate, shortage of irrigation water and inability of the Government to introduce and maintain modern water-saving irrigation technologies. According to local observers, fifty percent of newly planted trees die during the first summer. Experts believe that the maximum the project will achieve is a forest park in the mountains near Ashgabat, a far cry from the green belt intended to encircle the city. END COMMENT.

MILES